A Christian and His Grief 1 Thess. 4:1-18 Oct. 11, 1964

My sermon today has ~~as its~~ three sources, first--our scripture lesson this morning--a text that deals very realistically with death, grief and comfort; second--the recent self scrutiny our cutlure has undergone in the general area of funeral practices. (~~the American Way of Death and the High Cost of Dyerin continue to be best sellers. Magazines have included feature articles, Nat'l Funeral Directors Assn. have spent vast sums of money refutting the threats to their integrity and livelihood, and the Church has found itself very much involved in the entire dispute. The total affect has been a rather careful examination of our custom and traditions with the result that many of them have been found lacking~~). Third: I use as a source the simple fact that Grief is a universal common denominator. There is no one here who has not experienced the pain of grief at some time or another. Neither isthere anyone here today who will not experience grief again. Grief is a very real human emotion; it happens to us frequently, in varying degrees, and it happens to us all--when someone very close to us dies.

The initial problem in addressing oneself to the particular subject is that it is by no means certain that everyone is willing to accept the reality of grief. Somewhere along the line our culture has equated grief with weakness; or with a shallow religious faith--or worst of all with feminity. Somehow the notion has been fostered that if we believein God we should not grieve. Or--if I we're courageous and strong we do not need to express our gief. Doctors, Psy. and ministers realize the patent absurdity of this notions. For grief is a human emotion, whether we admit it or not; just as human an emotion as fear, or love, or joy. There is very little we can do about having or not having our emotions; they are simply part of us. But we can express them normally--or over-express them--or condition ourselves not to express them at all. Medical science has told us

that the healthiest cultures in the world are those that emit a temperament of free and normal emotional expression. Doctors have also told us that we are resiting the God--given body and psyche we have when we refuse to allow our emotions to express themselves in the naturl way. Grief, as an emotion, cannot be eliminated, it can only be pushed aside--inevitably to express itself in another, less healthy manner. Like anger, grief which is suppressed turns inward, often causing deep hostility--or in many cases, expressing itself in ~~narrow~~ physical symptoms. And so with one stroke, let us rject these odd ideas that faith and grief--or grief and strength do not mix and accept grief as a very basic and important emotive experience that is common to us all.

Psychology has observed that the emotion of grief operates like a process, with several stages. Like any other bodily or mental process, the stages of grief must be fulfilled, and if the process stalls at any particular stage the result may be harmful. Since we do share grief as a common experience it might be good to look briefly at its several stages. I am sure that you will recognize some, if not all, of these stages as you have experienced them, and I think it is helpful to see how they all fit together in a normal working out of the grief process.

The first stage of grief, when disaster or tragedy strikes, is shock. God has given us a natural anesthesia which operates with predictable physical symtoms. Wen overwhelming tragedy strikes we are numb; all our senses are dulled, we feel nothing. It is the shock stage that gives us a period of "non-feeling" in which to gather ourselves together--and in turn brings us slowly back to reality. Shock may last a few minutes, or a few hours or a few days--and there is nothing sinister or unhealthy about it unless it persists. The temporaray anesthesia of shock prepares us for the second stage--emotional release.

This is when the full weight of the tragedy comes crashing down upon us. The flood gates open, and we become almost uncontrollable in our expression of grief. God has given us tear glands--and this is when we should use them.

When our tears have spent themselves we enter the dark valley of despair, aloneness and isolation. This is the third stage. It is as if God is no longer in his heaven, and if he is it doesn't matter very much. It is normal to feel that no one has ever been so miserable. Religious doubt is common during this stage--and if this seems strange to you remember the words of the Psalmist: ("Why are you cast down, O my soul? I say to God my rock, why hast thou forgotten me?") and our Lord himself, as he approached death ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")

The fourth stage involves the physical symptoms of distress--loss of appetite, insomnia, perhaps headaches and digestive difficulty. This too is normal--unless our grief stops here--and then we could be in for serious trouble ourselves.

Complete preoccupation with the loss is the fifth stage of grief. Everything we see or do reminds of the one who used to be with us. We don't hear questions that are addressed to us; it becomes difficult to reason clearly. Unless we understand this as a normal expression of grief there is great danger here of being thrown back into despair.

Guilt is the sixth stage of grief and one of the easiest to recognize. In some instances we may have good reason to feel guilty; perhaps we did something at one time that hurt the deceased; perhaps we left too much undone or unsaid. But it is highly important to see that whether there is reason for our guilt or not, we will experience it--because it is part of grief. This is a crucial stage, for many people go on torturing themselves by extending natural guilt into their lives until it becomes all encompassing.

Hostility and resent come next in the grief process and while it may be unpleasant for those about us, it is a good sign, for now we are able to give expression to some of the strong feelings we have been holding back. Gradually depression and despair are receding as we begin to interact with other people, however negatively. We are hostile to the doctor because he operated; or we're hostile to the dr. becaus he didn't ~~operate~~ operate. We resent those who didn't come to the funeral home--and we resent those who did and stayed too long. Dr.'s funeral directors, ministers, relatives--anyone involved in the loss is the target of our hostility; and deep underneath we find a hostility turned toward a God who allowed the tragedy to occur in the first place.

The eighth stage of grief is the inability to return to a normal routine. We try very hard to take up once again the usual round of activities; but somthing holds us back. The reason for this feeling is that we arenot done grieving--but our culture frowns on public expressions of grief. And so we turn down the urgings of our friends to return to the card club or the coffee clutch--rather than cause them embarrassment.

The final stage of grief is a readjustment to life and reality. Notice, I did not say a return to reality or normality, because things will never be the same again; we will never be the same. Having gone through the process of grief we are different people. If we go through this ("valley of the shadow of death") with the knowledge that God is with us, despite the doubt and natural hostility we have felt, we will emerge with a different quality of faith than we had before. We will be stronger, deeper and bigger persons for having experienced to the fullest one of life's most mysterious evenss. We will be more of a brother to our neighbor; more able to help him through similar experiences.

Now the way I've described it the grief process sounds like an automatic, mechanical sequence that is fulfilled in a given number of days. Obviously this is not the case. In fact, more often than not, the process does not run its full course, but stalls in one stage or another. It is to this, and the reasons for it, that I now want to direct your attention. The villain is our culture--and many of the traditions and customs that over the years have come to be the accepted way of acting in a death situation.

Let's begin with our national fettish about men weeping. When our little boys fall off their tricycles we pick them up, brush them off with an "ah, ah, an - little boys don't cry": and when our adolescents sustain a tragic blow such as a low grade, or being dropped from the football squad, we admonish them to be men about it, and whatever they do, don't express their grief. And when they become men, and someone very dear to them dies - they cannot ~~cry~~ weep.

I mentioned our inevitable equation of religious faith with a stiff upper lip before. I have found this to be a very vicious detriment to normal grief. I have yet to be in a funeral home and not hear the words: ("It was God's will") directed to the mourners. — Implying, of course, that since God's direct intervention caused the death, there is no real reason to feel sorry. In the first place we don't really mean it when we say: ("Its God's will:") it is just one of the cliches that seem at the moment to be appropriate. In the second place we cannot believe that life is good, a manifestation of God's grace and love, if we are not profoundly reluctant to give it up, or to lose a loved one. Thirdly, the Bible is full of illustrations of people who grieved openly and directly. Jesus wept: when Peter denied Christ he went out and wept: to turn again to the Psalter, we hear the words: ("My tears have been my food night and day.")

As a whole our culture refuses to allow grief its reality. Years ago grieving men wore black arm bands, and women wore black dresses and veils and when people saw them they knew they were grieving. Today, however, ~~We must~~ we must not visibly express our grief; we criticize those who do: and we join a great conspiracy of silence whenever we encounter someone who is, or should be, grieving. In conversation we do all in our power to talk about anything but the deceased. Any inane, trite subject will do, so long as it prevents an emotional outburst. And all the while the griever is crying out for help: for someone to tell him that they too miss the deceased: for someone to share the pain for a moment - to help carry the burden.

Finally the grief process is affected, for beter or for worse, by the Funeral Director, and the Funeral itself. In her book, The American Way of Death, Jessica Mitford delivers a violent broad side to the entire funeral industry from top to bottom. And in most cases it was a well-deserved blow. What was once a matter handled by Church and Home is now the stock in trade of a gigantic industry. Now, this is not to say that all Funeral Directors are Just business men in disguise, more concerned with profit than service. I do not hesitate to defend our local establishment and its proprietor: but I have had other experiences with other establishments that warrant some very harsh criticism. Some funeral directors seem bent on eliminating grief entirely: emotional outbursts upset the dignity of the atmosphere, and so on. Others seem dedicated to denying the fact of death. Most resent very highly the suggestion that the funeral ~~be held in the Church~~ is a worship service and ought to be held in a Church according to the teachings and doctrines of that church. In any case the very necessary process of grief all too frequently stalls in the funeral home, never completeing its course. For too frequent the church and christianity are relegated to a secondary, supplemtary role.

The Church's role in the grief situation is to be a community of faith: a refuge for those who cry out for a helping hand. Instead of joining the conspiracy of silence the Church, through its individual members, ought to be ready to share the burden, to be a friend and help mate in a time of need. Of all places the church ought to be the place where grief, in all its forms and variations, can be freely expressed. In the Church we ought to be able to by-pass all the customs and tradition and get to the root of the matter: that here is a neighbor who is in pain and sorrow - a neighbor whose immediate need is someone to share the burden.

Finally, the church ought to stand as a constant reminder that God shares our grief: and that he has provided a hope and assurance that ultimately heals our mourning. The Psalmist knew this as he drew upon the very powerful and fitting metaphors of God's Rod and Staff: the strong and eternal presence of God that comfort us even as we walk through the lonely valley of death. God knows our grief: surely the heart of God poured forth in weeping as Jesus Christ died. Just as surely God grieves with his children: just as surely God is close to us when we need His stregth.

Paul, very gently and warmly, speaks to us today, as he did to the early Thessalonians. He spoke to them, that they might grieve, but not as those who have no hope. And then he directed them to the miracle of God's love as it was expressed in Jesus Christ. This, then, is our hope: this is the basic belief that undergirds our grief: -That God so loved man that he gave his only begotten son. We believe in that love: we see it in life: we see it in a perfectly balanced world: we see it dramatically revealed in human birth. We celebrate and affirm that love in the Sacrament of Baptism, as we place upon little children the mark of God's Grace. In our history God has demonstrated his love dramatically: we are

reminded of the extent of that Love every time our eyes fall upon its symbol, the Cross of Jesus Christ.

And so, let us grieve, freely and openly. Hearing the words of St. Paul, let us grieve, but not as those who have no hope. For we have hope, - in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.